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## NOTES ON THE *BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME*

### I. TOUT CE QUI N'EST POINT VERS, N'EST POINT PROSE

In Act III, scene iii, of Molière's masterpiece, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, there is a passage of considerable interest upon which editors have not agreed. It is our purpose in this note to present a few suggestions which have influenced our decision in favor of one group of editors as opposed to the other. As far as we know, the arguments that we offer have not as yet been put forward in their completeness even by an editor who favors the reading that we feel forced to adopt.

The passage in the original edition of 1671 whose text is adopted by Despois-Mesnard is as follows:

Monsieur Jourdain, puffed with pride at his recently acquired knowledge that the language of ordinary conversation is prose, is endeavoring to impress this fact upon his good wife:

*Monsieur Jourdain:* Hé non! ce n'est pas cela. Ce que nous disons tous deux, le langage que nous parlons à cette heure?

*Madame Jourdain:* Hé bien?

*Monsieur Jourdain:* Comment est-ce que cela s'appelle?

*Madame Jourdain:* Cela s'appelle comme on veut l'appeler.

*Monsieur Jourdain:* C'est de la prose, ignorante.

*Madame Jourdain:* De la prose?

*Monsieur Jourdain:* Oui, de la prose. Tout ce qui est prose, n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers, *n'est point prose*. Heu, voilà ce que c'est d'étudier. Et toi [Nicole], sais-tu bien comme il faut faire pour dire U?

The italics above are ours. From the *prose* of the italicized phrase there is a reference to a footnote in the Despois-Mesnard edition (p. 106 of Vol. VIII) as follows: "N'est point vers, est prose. (1674, 82, 94B, 1734.) Y a-t-il une faute dans l'original? Est-ce Molière qui a voulu que Monsieur Jourdain s'embrouillât ici tout à fait?"

This footnote is doubly interesting. In the first place we see

that no edition is mentioned as having what is a perfectly possible other variant, namely:

et tout ce qui est vers, n'est point prose.

If we ask why, two reasons seem probable. Had this other possible correction been made, the whole phrase would have run:

(A) Tout ce qui est prose, n'est point vers; et tout ce qui est vers, n'est point prose.

This phrase is not as well balanced as:

(B) Tout ce qui est prose, n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers, est prose,

which is the reading of 1674 and subsequent editions. Moreover, had the correction been made as in (A) above, the whole phrase would have been just as sensible as what the *maître de philosophie* had said in Act II, scene iv:

Tout ce qui n'est point prose est vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers est prose.

The only difference is that the negatives are in the second and fourth clauses, instead of being in the first and third.

Now the reading (B) above has one peculiarity that is not immediately apparent. Although it makes sense, the second part is nothing but an inverted repetition of the first:

First: Tout ce qui est prose, *n'est point vers*.

Second: Et tout ce qui *n'est point vers*, est prose.

The italics may help to bring this fact out clearly, and also reveal the peculiar balance of the phrase.

It is of course true that there is some humor in this repetition, Jourdain does not get the whole of what the teacher had said, but what he gets he says twice. Our feeling, however, is that this humor is too veiled to be immediately apparent in dialogue uttered rapidly, and that even when it is grasped, the humorous touch is not as great or vigorous as what stood in the original 1671 edition, namely:

Tout ce qui est prose, n'est point vers; et tout ce qui n'est point vers, n'est point prose.

The nonsense of this is immediately grasped by the average listener or reader, whereas the repetition of a perfectly sensible

remark, as in the text of 1674, etc., lacks the quality and the quantity of spontaneous humor which is the eminent characteristic of Molière.

The second reason why the note in Despois-Mesnard is interesting is this: The editor, M. Mesnard, does not offer his own solution or even suggest his preference. As a result editors have divided themselves into two groups. Among those who have adopted the reading, "n'est point vers, est prose," which, as noted, first appears in the edition of 1674, are: L. Moland, M. Pellisson, G. Vapereau, F. M. Warren, M. Levi, Moriarity, Wilhelm Scheffler, C. Humbert, Adolf Laun, Francis Tarver, Marc Ceppi, Roi-Guitteau, Schele de Vere.

The group that has preferred the reading of the original edition of 1671, "n'est point vers, n'est point prose," includes: Ch. L. Livet, W. Mangold, Platow, Georges Monval, Ernest Thirion, Maurice Albert.

Of these Albert alone calls attention to a similar misquoting by Harpagon in Act III, scene i, of *L'avare*. Valère has just suggested to him the *dire d'un ancien*: "il faut manger pour vivre, et non pas vivre pour manger."

*Harpagon*: Ah! que cela est bien dit! Approche, que je t'embrasse pour ce mot. Voilà la plus belle sentence que j'aie entendue de ma vie. Il faut vivre pour manger, et non pas manger pour vi . . . . Non, ce n'est pas cela. Comment est-ce que tu dis?

It is worthy of note that Harpagon, although a shrewd fellow, is yet made to misquote something that has been told him immediately before, all this of course in the interest of humor. May we not think that Molière had a similar humorous purpose when he allows the stupid Jourdain to misquote in such a way that the result is nonsense? Is not such a misquoting the more possible since Jourdain's lesson with the teacher of philosophy had occurred in the previous act? In this connection we quote the note of Thirion before adding to its general argument, some suggestions of our own: "M. Jourdain répète mal la leçon de son maître de philosophie et finit, en s'embrouillant, par dire des choses qui n'ont pas de sens. Certains éditeurs voient ici une faute d'impression; mais rien n'est plus naturel que l'embarras de M. Jourdain à répéter des choses auxquelles il ne comprend goutte."

Thirion is perfectly right in our opinion. Jourdain is incapable of repeating anything that is told him by his several teachers. He mixes everything up. Take as first instance the effort to repeat the description of the pronunciation of U which follows immediately:

Tu allonges les lèvres en dehors, et approches la mâchoire d'en haut de celle d'en bas. [!]

Only the first part of this description, "en allongeant les deux lèvres en dehors," is in the description of U as given by the *maître de philosophie* in Act II, scene iv. The second part is a comical inversion of the description of the vowel E:

*Maître de philosophie*: La voix E se forme en rapprochant la mâchoire d'en bas de celle d'en haut.

Georges Monval in his edition of the *Bourgeois gentilhomme* (note on p. 160), having adopted the reading "n'est point prose" of the original edition, comments on this and on the comical description of U by Jourdain as follows: "Est-il besoin de faire remarquer que M. Jourdain répète tout de travers la leçon du maître de philosophie?"

Not only, however, does Jourdain repeat awry the lesson of the *maître de philosophie*, but he twists around the complimentary phrases in Act IV, scene iv, by which Covielle assumes to translate the Turkish of Cléonte:

*Covielle*: C'est-à-dire: "Monsieur Jourdain, votre cœur soit toute l'année comme un rosier fleuri."

Jourdain remembers this vaguely in Act V, scene iii, when he tries to use it in a compliment to Dorimène:

Madame, je vous souhaite toute l'année votre rosier fleuri.

Similarly Covielle's rendering (Act IV, scene iv); "que le ciel vous donne la force des lions et la prudence des serpents," becomes completely inverted in Jourdain's compliment to Dorante (Act V, scene iii):

Monsieur, je vous souhaite la force des serpents et la prudence des lions.

This inversion is of the same order as that made by Harpagon in *L'avare* which we have noted above.

Not only is Jourdain incapable of repeating lessons given him orally or compliments which he hears, but he is equally stupid when

he tries to dance, to fence, or even to make the famous third bow to Dorimène. His absurdly literal interpretations of his instructions mark him out the fool that Molière clearly intended. Jourdain is unable to learn any of the things that he tries so hard to learn, and in this fact lies most of the humor of his character, and indeed, to some readers, an element of pathos as well.

Our final thought is this: If the correction from "n'est point prose" of the original 1671 edition to the "est prose" of later editions is to be accepted, the whole statement then becomes the *only* thing of all that Jourdain is taught which he repeats correctly. As such it would stand out in sharp contrast to the many things that he utterly fails to repeat correctly. We cannot think that Molière so intended. Ever alive to the humor of a situation, he surely would not let slip the excellent opportunity afforded by this incident. Once we grant that a nonsensical misquotation is more humorous than a correct repetition, we must, it seems safe to say, prefer the reading of the original edition to the attempt to correct this in any or in all later editions.

An interesting side-light is afforded by the 1671 imitation in England by Ravenscroft, *The Citizen turned Gentleman*. Here in the corresponding passage one reads: "Yes, Prose, all that is prose is not verse and all that is not verse is not prose." The translator appreciated the humor intended sufficiently to prefer its retention to its elimination.

## II. CHÂTIMENTS. SOUFFLETS

In Act III, scene ix, Cléonte and Covielle, master and servant, are venting their displeasure at the treatment accorded them by their sweethearts, Lucile and Nicole. Cléonte as the better educated uses the language of his social station which Covielle parodies or imitates in a very humorous manner. Cléonte's words are well chosen and elegant, befitting his superior culture, whereas Covielle's suggest the kitchen:

*Cléonte:* Tant de larmes que j'ai versées à ses genoux!

*Covielle:* Tant de seaux d'eau que j'ai tirés au puits pour elle!

*Cléonte:* Tant d'ardeur que j'ai fait paraître à la chérir plus que moi-même!

*Covielle*: Tant de chaleur que j'ai soufferte à tourner la broche à sa place!

*Cléonte*: Elle me fuit avec mépris!

*Covielle*: Elle me tourne le dos avec effronterie!

*Cléonte*: C'est une perfidie digne des plus grands *châtiments*.

*Covielle*: C'est une trahison à mériter mille *soufflets*. etc. etc.

So runs the text of the Despois-Mesnard edition and of all French editions which we have seen. In a group of editions in English, however, the words *châtiments* and *soufflets* have in some mysterious way changed places. This group comprises the editions by Francis Tarver, Schele de Vere, F. M. Warren, and Roi-Guitteau. We have searched in vain for some warrant for this change. No such variant is furnished by the standard edition of Despois-Mesnard and, as far as we know, no such variant exists anywhere. It seems, judging by the context, that the elegant word *châtiments* should naturally belong to the educated master, and that the coarser word *soufflets* should be uttered by the servant. Pending the discovery of some warrant for the changed positions of these words, we believe that we have in these four English editions a typographical error, which was made first in the oldest of the four and repeated in the others through neglect of collating their text carefully with that of the standard edition. If this supposition be correct, we have rather an interesting example of the propagation of an error, and we trust that this note may help in its removal.

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